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HISTORY lesson

Manhattan High celebrates its 100th graduating class

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Manhattan High School Class of 2014 students will receive their diplomas today, and this class is special.

This class is the 100th in Manhattan to graduate from a four year high school program, marked by the creation of the old high school — now the west half of the East Campus building at 901 Poyntz Ave. that houses the ninth-graders.

“I know the kids are pumped about it,” MHS Principal Greg Hoyt said.

He said the milestone will be acknowledged during the graduation ceremony, and the students’ senior-class shirts announce that they are No. 100.



A rendering of the original Manhattan High School, now MHS' East Campus on Poyntz, drawn by the architect, H.B. Winter.

Photo courtesy Riley County Historical Society

The first class of students at MHS graduated on Wednesday, June 2, 1915, with 34 students — 17 boys and 17 girls — at the Marshall Theatre downtown, according to a June 3, 1915, report from *The Manhattan Republic*, the newspaper that later became *The Manhattan Mercury*.

This year’s graduation is just a little bit bigger with about 380 students receiving diplomas in Bramlage Coliseum.

In 1915, class No. 1 listened to a graduation address from W.L. Burdick, the dean of the law school of the University of Kansas. This year’s speakers are seniors Hanna Hayden and Lakith Ranaweera.

In 1915, the song played at graduation was “The Moon Drops Low” by Charles Wakefield Cadman. This year, it’s “The Star Spangled Banner” and the MHS alma mater.

One hundred classes later, Class of 2014 student body president Sam Livsey said his class is like a big family.

“This class is really united,” Livsey said. “There is always something to keep us together.”

Interpersonal skills teacher Barb Crooks said the class came together after the deaths of two of its students during the class's freshman year.

Livsey said that while he's excited to move onto the next steps in life, he'll miss his classmates with whom he said he's made friends for life.

"It's been a good ride," he said. "We're the first of the new school and the last of the old school."

Livsey was referring to the major construction at the West Campus completed two years ago, when his class was the last to attend the older version of the school and the first to go through it when it was renovated.

But during its freshman year, the class attended school at the ninth-grade center on Poyntz Avenue and Ninth Street, which was completed in the summer of 1914 and occupied by the fall semester of that year.

The architect was H.B. Winter, and the building cost more than \$100,000.

A May 21, 1914, report from The Manhattan Republic said the building was likely to be completed July 1 that year, according to the board of education president, S.A. Bardwell.

"Built of native limestone and cement, the building is fireproof and will remain in good condition long after Manhattan has outgrown it and ready to put up another," the report said.



A carving above the door at Manhattan High's East Campus building commemorates its first year.

Staff photo by Fran Ruchalski

The floors were maple and the finishes were oak wood. The auditorium would be able to hold 650 students.

The first floor was built for classrooms and offices, and in the basement there was space for a drawing department, a department of agriculture, and chemistry and physics laboratories, among other learning areas, the report said.

"In the classrooms 38,000 square feet of slate blackboard has been used, and the building will be warmed by 6,700 feet of radiation," the newspaper report said. "As W.L. Haslle, superintendent of construction says, 'the people of Manhattan are getting a whole lot of building for the price paid.'"

Despite the Manhattan High building being 100 years old, however, the high school education system in the city is much older.

The Manhattan High on Ninth and Poyntz replaced a building called the Avenue School, and before that, students attended a variety of schools in the mid-1860s following the Civil War.

Many Manhattan students attended prep schools in which students paid tuition and often were boarded.



The class of 1908 poses outside the Central School. The school building sat at the site of what is now Woodrow Wilson Elementary.

Photo courtesy MHS Alumni Association

“There were several tuition schools,” said Janet Duncan, a member of the Riley County Historical Museum Board of Trustees. “They were probably mostly grade schools because by the time kids got older in the really early days, they had to go work somewhere.”

Duncan has been researching Manhattan school system’s history since 2006 for the Manhattan High School Alumni Association, for which she is the communications officer.

Kansas State Agricultural College, now Kansas State University, also educated high school students in a prep school program before the original Manhattan High was built.

Some high schoolers also attended Central School, which was in the building that is now Woodrow Wilson Elementary at 312 N. Juliette., before the new high school came to be in 1914.

The population of Manhattan that year was just 6,564 people, but the city gained 126 in a year.

“Manhattan was really growing, and education has always been important, so they did try to keep having enough room,” Duncan said.

So MHS’s class of 2014 isn’t the 100th ever graduating class in Manhattan, but it’s the 100th of its modern era, when the city’s public education system sort of consolidated and became consistent, with a four-year program and the construction of an official limestone high school that’s still standing.

“It’s a great old building,” Duncan said. ‘The idea of it represents one link in the longer history of Manhattan’s education system.’

Riley County Historical Museum director Cheryl Collins agreed. She said creating the high school was a great step in building Manhattan’s educational package.

“I think it’s incredible to think that we had no dedicated high school building until 100 years ago,” Collins said. “I think it is a real milestone. Education has always been really important to this community.”